

The PFT: One Test, One Scale
EWS Contemporary Issue Paper
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To
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Introduction

According to the *Guidebook for Marines*, "Physical fitness for a Marine means the maintenance of a healthy body, the endurance to withstand the stress of prolonged activity and adverse environment, the capacity to endure the discomforts that accompany fatigue and the maintenance of combat effectiveness."¹ The book does not make a distinction between Marines, male versus female, or young versus old. Yet the test that Marines must endure twice a year does. The United States Marine Corps (USMC) must hold all Marines to the same physical fitness test (PFT) standards regardless of age or gender because of the impact on promotions, the expectations placed on Marines, the effect on unit cohesion, and the physiological capabilities of women.

Background

While the Marine Corps has been around for 232 years, the Physical Fitness/Readiness Test policies have not. It was not until 1909 when President Theodore Roosevelt, by executive order, brought about the first requirement for physical readiness testing. Marine line officers were required to complete a 50-mile walk while staff officers were required to complete a 90-mile horseback ride. Both were to be completed

¹ Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, ed., *Guidebook for Marines*, 16th ed. (Quantico: The Marine Corps Association, 1990), 173.

within three days. Over the last 100 years or so, the policy has changed several times. It disappeared during World War's I and II. The policy that resurfaced in 1956 looked nothing like that of President Roosevelt's era. The test was centered around chin ups, push ups, sit ups, one minute squat thrusts, broad jump, 50-yard duck waddle, an 880-yard run with no time limit for those age 30 to 40, and a 440-yard run in less than 75 seconds for those under the age of 30. While women have been in the Marine Corps since 1918, the first policy requiring an evaluation of physical fitness for female Marines came about in 1969. In 1972, the male version evolved into pull-ups, sit-ups, and a three-mile run for Marines under the age of 46. The year 1975 brought about a female version that included the flexed-arm hang, sit-ups, and a one-and-a-half-mile run. In 1996, male Marines were told they could no longer "kip" on the pull-ups, and the run for female Marines was increased to three miles. In 1997, sit-ups were replaced with crunches, and all Marines, regardless of age, were told they are required to take the PFT.² Currently, in order to score a perfect 300 points on the PFT, male Marines must perform 20 dead-hang pull-ups, 100 abdominal crunches, and run 3 miles in 18 minutes while female Marines must perform the flexed arm hang for 70 seconds, 100 crunches,

² U.S. Marine Corps School of Infantry West, *Marine Corps Combat Fitness Working Group Brief*, 2007 (Camp Pendalton, CA: 2007), slide 4.

and run 3 miles in 21 minutes.³ There are also minimum performance requirements in each event and an overall minimum passing score (see Table 1).⁴

AGE	PULL-UPS/ FLEXED-ARM	ABDOMINAL CRUNCHES	3.0 MILE RUN (MIN)	TOTAL POINTS	MIN SCORE	ADDNTL 'P OINTS NEEDED
17-26	3/15 (SEC)	50	28(m) / 31(f)	105	135	30
27-39	3/15 (SEC)	45	29(m) / 32(f)	94	110	16
40-45	3/15 (SEC)	45	30(m) / 33(f)	88	88	0
46+	3/15 (SEC)	40	33(m) / 36(f)	65	65	0

Table 1: Minimum Acceptable Performance Requirements for PFT

Promotions

As stated by the Promotion Branch of the Marine Corps, "The mission of the Promotion Branch (MMPR) is to conduct regular and reserve promotion boards in order to ensure every Marine (officer and enlisted) has a fair and equitable opportunity for advancement to the next grade."⁵ However, a promotion system that takes into account a physical fitness test score based upon two separate and distinct scales of measure cannot be fair and equitable. The USMC must hold all Marines to the same PFT standards regardless of age or gender because of the impact on promotions.

³ U.S. Marine Corps, *MCO P6100.12 W/CH 1 Marine Corps Physical Fitness Test and Body Composition Program Manual*, 2002 (Washington, D.C.: C 472TP, Headquarters United States Marine Corps, 2008), G-1.

⁴ U.S. Marine Corps, *MCO P6100.12 W/CH 1 Marine Corps Physical Fitness Test and Body Composition Program Manual*, 2-9.

⁵ Promotion Branch, U.S. Marine Corps, https://www.manpower.usmc.mil/portal/page?_pageid=278,1936016&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL, accessed on 13 February 2008.

The impact of the PFT score on the promotion process

When considered for promotion to the rank of corporal or above, whether by the commanding officer or a board established by MMSB, the Marine's PFT score(s) is (are) considered. For promotion to corporal and sergeant, the PFT score is related to who gets promoted and who does not by way of the automated composite score system. It can be shown that the PFT accounts for between ten and nineteen percent of the final composite score depending on how the individual Marine performs in all the areas taken into account.⁶ For promotion to staff sergeant and above, the PFT score is recorded on each of the Marine's fitness reports (FITREP's) to be reviewed and briefed as a "whole Marine" to the promotion board established by MMSB.⁷

Per Marine Corps Order, for enlisted Marines of all ranks, "Promotion is restricted following a failure of the semi-annual PFT."⁸ For officers there is a command delay regarding their promotion, "Each monthly promotion MARADMIN contains a paragraph charging commanding officers with ensuring that officers to be promoted are mentally, physically, morally, and professionally

⁶ U.S. Marine Corps, *MCO P1400.32D Marine Corps Promotion Manual Volume 2 Enlisted Promotions*, 2006 (Washington, D.C.: MMPR-2, Headquarters United States Marine Corps, 2007), 2-28.

⁷ U.S. Marine Corps, *MCO P1400.32D Marine Corps Promotion Manual Volume 2 Enlisted Promotions*, 3-3.

⁸ U.S. Marine Corps, *MCO P1400.32D Marine Corps Promotion Manual Volume 2 Enlisted Promotions*, 1-19.

qualified for promotion.”⁹ In other words, regardless of a Marine’s rank, a failure of his semi-annual PFT should result in a delay of any pending promotion until, at a minimum, a passing score is logged. Therefore, for corporals and above, a Marine’s PFT score has a direct impact on his selection and promotion to the next higher grade.

Two people competing for the same job need the same evaluation.

When the Marine Corps decided to use the PFT score when computing the automated composite score for lance corporals and corporals and put it on the FITREP of sergeants and above, the institution set a precedence that the PFT score is just as important as a Marine’s education, courage, communication skills, score on the rifle or pistol range, and every other attribute. The other precedent being set by the order that governs the administration of the PFT and its scoring is that female Marines are less capable than their male counterparts and therefore unable to compete physically.

The USMC should observe other physically demanding professions. The Seattle Fire Department administers the Candidate Physical Ability Test to all candidates for hire. The candidates are evaluated against time in eight elements to include the following: a three-minute stair climb at a rate of

⁹ U.S. Marine Corps, *MCO P1400.31C Marine Corps Promotion Manual Volume 1 Officer Promotions*, 2006 (Washington, D.C.: MMPR-1, Headquarters United States Marine Corps, 2007), 5-5.

60 steps per minute while carrying an additional 25 pounds, a 150-foot hose drag, a 150-foot equipment carry, a forcible entry, a 75-foot rescue drag of a 165-pound dummy, and a 60-pound ceiling door breach. Each candidate must complete all eight elements while wearing a 50-pound weighted vest. The test is very strenuous, and all candidates, regardless of gender or age, are evaluated by the same standard, pass or fail.¹⁰ Similarly, two lance corporals, one male and one female, both with the same MOS also deserve to be evaluated for their physical ability by one standard.

Expectations

Certain basics that govern the actions of its members exist in every profession. Two fundamentals of being a Marine stand out ahead of all others, every Marine a rifleman and leadership by example. The USMC must hold all Marines to the same PFT standards regardless of age or gender because of the expectations placed on Marines.

Every Marine a rifleman, each Marine officer a provisional rifle platoon commander

These two statements are introduced to Marines for the first time before they even become Marines. Whether in recruit training or Officer Candidate School, these statements are

¹⁰ Seattle.gov, *Seattle Fire Department*, http://www.seattle.gov/fire/employment/ffjob_physicalagility.htm, accessed on 13 February 2008.

stressed during every aspect of their training and become the foundation of their very existence as Marines. *The Marine Officer's Guide* states, "Today, women serve in all units except those primarily concerned with engaging the enemy on the ground with individual or crew served weapons, while being exposed to hostile fire and to a high probability of direct physical contact with the hostile force's personnel."¹¹ Some people argue that for this reason female Marines should not be held to a physical standard appropriate for a combat Marine. However, in today's current operating environment where there is no well-defined rear area, all units, regardless of their primary mission, can expect to be exposed to hostile fire and direct physical contact with hostile forces.

During an interview with Elaine Grossman, Major General James Mattis, then Commanding General of the First Marine Division, revealed the confidence he had in his Marines in reference to the attack on Baghdad in 2003:

[I] anticipated before the war that Iraqi irregular forces – the Fedayeen Saddam militia – would threaten the long U.S. supply lines en route to Baghdad. But...the Marines were ready for such a contingency. A Corps motto, Every Marine a Rifleman, meant I was not concerned about my supply lines. The combat service support troops had been warned you are going to have to fight your way through to

¹¹ Kenneth W. Estes, *The Marine Officer's Guide*, 6th ed.(Annapolis, MD: United States Naval Institute, 2000), 297.

get supplies to us. Every Marine is trained as a rifleman, unlike some services. And this was not a concern to us.¹²

Because of this expectation in their service, Marine leaders must be prepared both physically and mentally, while the Marines that they lead must trust and respect their leaders under the extreme conditions of combat.

The importance of physical fitness in the profession of arms cannot be overstated. What should be said about the so-called "non-combat arms" MOS's? Is physical fitness less important to a maintenance Marine than to an armor Marine? Of course not, all Marines must be prepared for the eventuality that MajGen Mattis spoke of. Consequently, all Marines must be held to the same PFT standards.

Leadership by example

Marine Corps leadership is based upon the simple idea that one should never ask his Marines to do something he is not willing and able to do himself. This willingness of the leader to put himself in harm's way or experience the same harsh environment as his Marines motivates those Marines to follow. The authors of *The Marine Corps Way* state, "A willingness to perform above and beyond the call of duty and share hardship - no matter how miserable or inconsequential the task - ripples throughout the entire organization, inspires higher levels of

¹² Elaine M. Grossman, "Marine General: Iraq War Pause 'Could Not Have Come At Worse Time'," *News Analysis*, Inside the Pentagon, http://www.d-n-i.net/grossman/itp_mattis.htm, accessed on 13 February 2008.

performance at all levels, and creates an undeniable credibility for the leader – through actions, not words.”¹³ How can a leader at any level hold themselves to a different standard of physical fitness than the Marines they lead? All Marines, regardless of age or gender, must be held to the same PFT standards.

Unit Cohesion

According to the *Center for Military Readiness* website, “Cohesion can be negatively affected by the introduction of any element that detracts from the need for such key ingredients as mutual confidence, commonality of experience, and equitable treatment.”¹⁴ According to Lauren Edwards, author of *Raising the Bar*, “over 50 percent of males surveyed felt the flexed-arm hang was an unfair exercise.”¹⁵ Within a service that prides itself on its esprit de corps, such detractors from our unit cohesion must be taken seriously. Regardless of age or gender, all Marines must be held to the same physical fitness test (PFT) standards because of the effect on unit cohesion.

¹³ Eric K. Clemons, Vincent Martino, and Jason A. Santamaria, “Leadership Philosophy,” *The Marine Corps Way*, <http://www.themarinecorpsway.com/philosophy.htm>, accessed on 13 February 2008.

¹⁴ Center for Military Readiness, “Women in Land Combat,” Women in Combat, <http://www.cmrlink.org/WomenInCombat.asp?docID=233>, accessed on 13 February 2008.

¹⁵ Lauren Edwards, “Raising the Bar,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 91, no. 12 (2007): par. 14, http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/mca-members/results.html?st=advanced&QryTxt=&type=current&sortby=REVERSE_CHRON&date=0&frommonth=03&fromday=01&fromyear=1916&tomonth=02&today=18&toyear=2008&By=lauren+edward&Title=&publications=pmid%2827962+OR+59199%29. Accessed 18 February 2008.

Physiological Capabilities of Women

Some would argue that women are physiologically different than men and, therefore, are not capable of lifting their own weight or running as fast as men. However, many examples exist in the modern world, of women who have challenged the popular belief that women are physically inferior to men. One such woman, a champion Soviet swimmer, had challenged Charles Poliquin and an entire gym full of men to a pull-up contest. Of the men, Charles had done the most, 23 dead hang pull-ups, a very respectable number by Marine Corps standards. However, the woman managed 60 dead hang pull-ups before quitting. While the champion swimmer represents one extreme case, Charles Poliquin, a world-renowned strength coach, applied his knowledge to a group not known for their upper body strength. Says Charles, "I was able to increase the women's Canadian National ski team's average number of chin-ups from zero to 12 reps in 11 weeks. They could also perform reps holding a 35-pound dumbbell with their feet."¹⁶ The take away being an entire group of women who initially averaged zero pull-ups, increased their average by the same number as the number of weeks that they trained. Thus, some women are just as capable as men if they train correctly

¹⁶ Charles Poliquin, "No More Geek Back Training," *Testosterone: Muscle with Attitude*, Testosterone Publishing, LLC, http://www.testosterone.com/findArticle.do?article=body_100back, accessed on 13 February 2008.

and as a result, all Marines should be held to the same PFT standards.

Conclusion

The differences in the physical fitness test standards among Marines are unacceptable. Regardless of age or gender, all Marines must be held to the same physical fitness test (PFT) standards because of the impact on promotions, the expectations placed on Marines, the effect on unit cohesion, and the true physiological capabilities of women. The Marine Corps should be compelled to even the playing field for all Marines regardless of age or gender.

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